

ART2LIFE

ACADEMY

Speaker 1: Welcome to another inspirational video segment. I'm sitting in the studio of Mitchell Johnson, one of my favorite painters. I've followed his work for a long time but have never really had the nerve or courage to call him up and come down and see him. He's been really generous today to let us do that. I wanted to just dive into this and maybe you could just give us a little bit of your background, I know you went to Parsons. Just the background of how you came to here and then, we'll dive into your work.

Mitchell J: We're in the Bay area in California which you didn't mention so ...

Speaker 1: Yes. Silicon Valley, Redwood City.

Mitchell J: Yeah and I came to Silicon Valley in 1990 after finishing Parsons in New York and it was just good luck that my brother lived in Palo Alto and he said, "Why don't you move out here?" Strangely enough, he found me a job working for Sam Francis.

Speaker 1: No kidding?

Mitchell J: Yeah, which I didn't know if you knew about that.

Speaker 1: No, I do not.

Mitchell J: He actually called me on the phone in Soho, in Manhattan. I'm done with grad school and I don't really have a certain direction where to go next. I've been doing some part-time jobs with all kinds of artists like Frank Stella and Sol LeWitt. My brother, Ed, calls me and he's like, "Hey, somebody's moving out of the house in Palo Alto and it'd be really easy. You can just come out and there's a bedroom, you could start renting it next month." I'd never been in Northern California but I thought, "This sounds interesting," and I said, "Okay, just call me back. Give me a little part-time job and call me back."

I was interested but I was joking and next thing you know, a few days later, he met somebody who was actually working in Sam Francis' studio in Palo Alto. He calls me and he says, "Hey, I really did find a job if you want to come to California." It was so bizarre. I actually called Sol LeWitt on the phone and I said, "I don't know what to do, I want to just stay in New York and paint but it's so expensive to get a space. Maybe that's not really the right thing for me to do

and my brother just called me and he says that I can get this job with Sam Francis and moved to California." He said, "Well, I can't pay you to sharpen my pencils. I just don't need anybody that much more right now. You should go." Sol LeWitt actually said, "Go to California."

Speaker 1: Wow, because that's a scary move really. I mean ...

Mitchell J: Yeah but then, I could've just stayed for two months or six months. Anyway, so I came because of that opportunity and I kept moving around. I went back and forth between California and New York and then California and Europe, mostly going to France to paint outside in a landscape.

Speaker 1: Right, plein air. Yeah.

Mitchell J: Yeah and I would paint outside in California but I would also go into the garage at the house that we were renting and make little paintings. I'm out there making a painting outside.

Speaker 1: You're doing small paintings plein air, right?

Mitchell J: Yeah. This was a big painting for me in the '90s and so, I would sometimes paint outside paintings about half this size or even smaller. You're mixing all those colors when you're outside. You're looking and you're mixing on your palette and I'm making this landscape of California. Then, you go back into the garage, studio and there's all these colors that you've used outside and I wanted to keep working with them and see how they behaved and how they changed each other so I started making abstract paintings in the garage.

Speaker 1: Derived from landscape painting.

Mitchell J: Yeah, made from the colors that I mixed outside and I had done that in France a little bit too. At some point, I just came back into my apartment and I realize I want to just keep going. I don't want to keep painting the motif I was standing in front of but I definitely want to keep working with these colors and it was a very natural thing. In some ways this movement, if there really is a movement between representation and abstraction, it goes way back. At Parsons, I even did that. I was in the studio with everybody else painting models who would come and sat up for us and then, I would go over on the side sometimes and make paintings to try to see what happens when these little pieces of color maybe got a little bit bigger.

Speaker 1: Did you find it challenging to take that pivot from painting something you're looking at, which is damn hard to do, and then to go and take that into a studio and you have to completely unhinge there? I mean, was that hard to learn that? It was for me. I mean, that led to my abstract work but that was hard. How did you think about it? Was it just, "I just want to use these great colors," and you started making things or ... ?

Mitchell J: Well, I think it just naturally happened. I didn't think about it too much. I was painting outside and I really needed to be in front of the motif or the landscape. When I went back inside, I didn't feel like I could continue the painting until I got back out there. I would wait and go back tomorrow and see the place again.

Speaker 1: You weren't modifying something, you would just take that and then, you start another one with that color.

Mitchell J: Yeah. In the beginning, I wasn't really continuing that particular painting when I got back inside but here is a chance to use all those colors to continue exploring what you had been looking at but not directly in that same painting. That's not to say that all the other painting felt like a study or I didn't feel that the other painting was even in service of that landscape that needed some solution or maybe needed to change and I didn't know how. In terms of talking about what it felt like, I think it's important to say that slowly I started to feel like I could continue the painting that I've been making from life or making outside. In fact, I wanted to come back inside and put it up on a white wall or put it up on a wall where I could really see it more clearly, not outside ...

Speaker 1: Get back from it, yeah.

Mitchell J: Get back from it and it wouldn't have the context of everything around it that was going on, where I'm standing at a parking lot or I'm standing in front of a truck or something. What I was painting outside and then, what was happening with it when I was coming back into the studio was evolving at the same time that I was making these abstract paintings in parallel to that experience. Slowly overtime, not only did I get better at making a drawing or taking a photo that could serve something that I would work on in the studio, but just increasingly I felt like I wanted to be in here and to really see how the color was behaving. I still look outside all the time when I'm driving here from my house. I would go to Italy and I make little drawings, sometimes I'd paint outside but there's a lot of things that I want to work on that I should be in here where I have this space.

Speaker 1: You can control it and all this white space.

Mitchell J: Yeah. This nice daylight and I see how the painting is going to behave or where it ends up going, whether it goes to somebody's house or my house or a gallery, wherever it goes, it's going to leave this warehouse. It's definitely not going to be seen outdoors so I need to see what's really ...

Speaker 1: This is how it's going to be in its life on a wall.

Mitchell J: What's really going on with it, yeah. Anyway, I moved here from New York and I didn't expect to stay but I met my wife and fell in love and I stayed because of her really.

Speaker 1: Oh my God, wow. Okay, but when you moved out here and you were down in this area, where there many artists in this area? Did you have a community that

you ... ?

Mitchell J: Yeah. Well, I occasionally met other artists through different things that were going on but I just did my own thing. I didn't really pursue other people that much. It's not like I ever went out and painted in groups and things. Sometimes, people would e-mail me and say, "I'm going out painting and we even have this group, maybe you'd like to join us," but that's never been something I could really do.

Speaker 1: You've been pretty much being able to focus on your art and you were working with well-established artists to make money and then, you've been selling your work. You haven't been distracted by you work for a software company or anything, you've been able to pursue this. It's pretty unusual, right?

Mitchell J: Yeah, I did go to college and at the same time, I was studying drawing and painting and art history. I was taking philosophy and math and computers and all kinds of stuff. I worked at a computer job for two years in DC and went to art school at night at the Washington Studio School right in Georgetown. The work I was doing at night that I got a portfolio together so that I could go to grad school at Parsons in New York.

When I left Parsons in 1990 and moved here, I would occasionally do like a paint a house for somebody or something but it really was not long that, after getting here, that I started to sell a couple of paintings here and there. I lived on very little so if I could sell a painting for \$600, I could get through the month and spend a lot of time painting. I have been painting pretty much full-time for more than 20 years or so.

If my paintings are going anywhere, I've been very lucky to have such a focus and all that time. I can't imagine figuring out a lot of what I've done [crosstalk 00:09:54] juggling it even with teaching. Because I did teach really briefly when I came to Palo Alto at the Pacific Art League and taught a couple of landscape classes with people who just signed up and we would go meet and paint together. I never felt like I went to grad school in order to get a degree so I could teach. I went to grad school because I wanted to know more about painting and it just happens I got a Master's along the way.

Speaker 1: Right. The abstraction, when you came out here, you were already working in this way?

Mitchell J: The shapes were much more organic. They have become quite geometric and I'm sure they're going to continue to change but some of the abstraction that I was doing when I first got here like around '90, '91, '92, it was much more early [demon quorum 00:10:50], sort of De Kooning kind of stuff. I was very concerned about the mark making as much as the color and then, it really departed to where it was almost just about the color. Where this is is really important and where this is is really important but I'm not quite as concerned about that you get something engaging going on in the surface by the type of

brush stroke. That really did consume for a long time and I even ...

Speaker 1: Mark making, you could spend your whole life doing that. I mean when you said that like, "I'm not really consumed with mark making," I just thought, "Wow, what a relief in a way." It's like you just let go because I am, almost to a fault. That's why I think I'm drawn to your work because there's just an essence to it and I didn't really understand until you just said that, why that is because they don't have that but it's so nice. Then, that dropped away and then, it became more about space and color and surface. Not so much surface but just shape which is a lot.

Mitchell J: Well, there's space in this painting from the ...

Speaker 1: Depth I guess, yeah.

Mitchell J: From these two colors interacting or these three colors interacting but there's also something happening. With this, it's quite thin. This, you see some brush in it. This, you'd see the brush even more distinctly and then, of course, this is a bit thicker. That make space through the difference. I don't know if mark makings really would, the difference in the surface ...

Speaker 1: It's the density of the paint and the impasto.

Mitchell J: Yeah and that goes back to the [Karo 00:12:35] landscapes that we were talking about before.

Speaker 1: Yes, how you have the differences. When you're working on this, you're still working on this?

Mitchell J: No, this one's been going off and on for like three or four years. I actually changed and added this a couple of days ago and then, this gray, purpley, kind of difficult to describe color is on top of something that was a more distinctly blue color. It suddenly went from pretty exciting to becoming complex and mysterious in a way that I could never consciously go after. That's when I always know the painting is getting close to being done is when it usually ends up in a place I never could have predicted but also it feels like a complete thought somehow even though it's not really a verbal conclusion that I come to that it feels complete. It always has something very immediate about it but also something that feels really complex or unexpected or mysterious.

Speaker 1: Yes, it's not totally obtainable. Like it's simple but then it's also complex and challenging. Yeah, there's just a weightiness to it.

Mitchell J: I never know when that really happens except that it rarely happens quickly. When I was at Parsons on the wall in our huge studio, there were like 15 grad students and we shared this big studio and on the wall, there was a little slogan. It said, "Clarity and surprise." They had translated it because all different students would come through the grad school, they had it written in Korean and

in Chinese and in Italian and anybody who came, if it wasn't already there in their language, they had to add it. When they would repaint the studio once a year to clean it up, they always left that little section. Clarity and surprise or like accessibility and mystery. I mean, they're so verbal but they make for an emotional feeling, those two things.

Speaker 1: Right, absolutely. The difference is that you're dealing with when you're juggling. First of all, this is oil, is that right?

Mitchell J: Yeah, this is oil. This is the side of a building in Cape Cod that I've seen a bunch of times and I even painted in front of. This is another building that's cropped in front of it and it was actually quite representational initially.

Speaker 1: You starting, you had a, maybe, a photo or a drawing?

Mitchell J: A photo, a drawing, another little painting that I made larger. I mean, I probably made this larger because I had a little painting of this situation where you're looking through to this water and I was really intrigued with what grays and blues and yellows do you assemble to get something that vibrates the way this place did when I was looking at it. I made a little painting that I felt good about and I thought, "Well, what happens if I just increase the size of those colors and shapes?" Obviously, it's going to change.

When you have a little piece of red on this wall and then, you put it there, they're not the same thing and so I made this bigger version of that small painting. Sure enough, it was very self-conscious and you could feel it in the painting. There was something about it that wasn't convincing and so it just kicked around here in the studio like a lot of paintings do. At some point, I think, I probably added this thing in here, these two blues that are like a towel or something and I thought, "Wow, can you really make a serious painting with that towel?"

Speaker 1: Or this?

Mitchell J: Yeah and then, those are stripes. Maybe they were related to a chair but it doesn't really matter. Because either they're going to do ...

Speaker 1: It's the feeling that this gives us is like that feeling of that chair with that cloth on it That's what so interesting about your work, like I didn't identify the building but I've been to this place and that's interesting to me that you get that feeling of a place, that light place. It's not Mexico. This isn't Mexico, it's somewhere else but it you're doing it just with rectangles and density of paint and colors and arranging them. When you're working on this, are you after that feeling of that place or you let that go?

Mitchell J: No, it's really intuitive and it's not verbal at all. I mean, the idea of the place is a very verbal thing. I'm standing around in here, pacing around wondering what could I possibly do today. Sometimes driving over here, I'll think, "Okay, I'm

really ready to go back to a certain painting," and sure enough, I get here and I start on that painting. Plenty of days, I come in and it's just like, "This is where I'm going to be from 9:00 to 5:00." I get here and I see what happens.

There's that video of Agnes Martin in her studio and she says that a lot of the time she would just sit down and wait 10 minutes or wait two hours for inspiration to come. She would actually get a vision and she usually use that vision to make a thumbnail or a small drawing that was very considered, using math and all this kind of stuff.

Then, she was ready to go make the painting that was like a vision that came to her. She said that the painting is emotion, it's pure emotion. It's just not verbal emotion and I absolutely agree with that. I know that people attach themselves to, "Wow, I love that because it's Cape Cod and I love Cape Cod," and that's powerful. That sentimentality. I mean, we dismiss that but that's powerful stuff and I think the older you get, the more powerful it becomes.

Speaker 1: Yeah and there's the quality of light and outdoors in this that this has. It doesn't necessarily mean that you're painting Cape Cod but those feelings come in is that it's abstracted in a way but it comes across.

Mitchell J: It's emotional. It's really emotional. Like the painting of Manhattan that's behind you, I was in a hotel and I had no idea that I was going to get so intrigued by the shapes and the stuff that was out the window. I mean, great patterns. All kinds of great vertical, horizontal stuff interacting and I have to decide to what extent does it become, really descriptive and representational. That's intuitive. I just started and dive into it with a certain feeling about it.

Then, I see where it goes and I see if maybe I add this and it wasn't there or maybe I overly generalize this part or that part. Anyway, it evolves. It goes through this process and I really felt like it was done. I even reproduced it in a little catalog or something and even offered it to somebody. They didn't buy it, I still have it and then, I changed it. It was all this dark blue here and I put this weird gray, it almost acts like silver in here, more recently.

I really thought that the dark bluish sky did something interesting and made the buildings luminous or made them intriguing because it was such a big flat shape. Yeah, it never really felt mysterious to the point that I didn't want to touch it. One day, I was mixing this gray on another painting and I just thought, "Oh my God, what if I mix that in over here?" It's this very kind of impulsive, compulsive, intuitive thing. This was put away and I mixed this color for something else, I take it out and lo and behold after it's sitting around for like six months, it becomes this other thing that now, I think, somehow it became quite mysterious. I mean, it's obviously Manhattan but ...

Speaker 1: There's that background sky thing really coming up. It's like a piece of the puzzle piece coming forward with that thick sky. This has much more density than your other paintings. I feel like we can zoom in to pieces of this and it's great. Usually,

they're much more simplified.

Mitchell J: That's a painting with a whole lot of little marks. I mean, think about it as details so much as little shapes [crosstalk 00:21:29].

Speaker 1: Complexity or ...

Mitchell J: Yeah, they're very different. This is a totally different painting from that painting because of the scale and the shapes and the [decisions 00:21:39] become so different. The next thing you know this trip, where we're just staying in this hotel to do something else, became the source of a number of paintings but it's so much about New York on the one hand and then, it's all about these particular shapes that I used to build a painting. Somehow, those shapes have a powerful, emotional resonance for me. I understand, people see it and they're like, "Wow, that's Manhattan. I love that, I even know that building. I want that painting." I think on some level, they're actually having a much deeper experience and it's not that simple.

Speaker 1: Well, it's the arrangement of shapes, I think, ultimately that you respond to first. Then, it's a picture of a deer or whatever. The arrangement of those and the differences of things that are curated and put together in a way that is powerful. More powerful, in fact, than just glancing up maybe and seeing it out in the world. When you're taking something, whether it's realistic or not, and you're putting it, arranging it all, what I love about that is that somebody can just come along and they don't have any understanding necessarily of what you're doing but they just feel it. It's like great music. They just say, "I love that, I got to have that or I connect to that." You're hitting them. They feel it but they don't necessarily know why. I mean, we have to know why because we're trying to figure it out.

Mitchell J: Well, maybe we have to know why or maybe we don't.

Speaker 1: We have to understand something. We got to say yes or no to this, try it and then, get rid of it.

Mitchell J: Well, that's beautiful that we're segueing into this discussion about editing because the whole painting is just a bunch of choices of what you leave in and what you take out. I think you operate on those decisions or choices in a non-verbal way at some point.

Speaker 1: Sure, I mean, you're going ...

Mitchell J: I mean, something has to happen where, of course, you draw from life and you draw from life and you look at other people's paintings and you study art history and you look at the world and you get better and better at looking. I think part of what that does is it unwinds your acculturation to how you make sense of the world because we go down the street and you just identify everything. You don't really look at it because looking takes time and you have to get your kid to

school and you got to get the car [crosstalk 00:24:02].

Speaker 1: Yeah, [crosstalk 00:24:03] at the wheel. You're just seeing there's that thing again, you're not really looking at that mailbox and the color or ...

Mitchell J: I mean, paying attention takes energy. We don't always have the energy available so we identify everything but when you really look at things, I remember a teacher, my teacher Joe at the Washington Studio School said, "That still life, it's all right there. You just can't see it but the still life is telling you everything but you can't see it." It's very hard to imagine that you can look with a fair amount of energy and attention and yet, not see everything that's going on. Giorgio Morandi, Josef Albers, Karo, Matisse, all these artists who I like, all their paintings are about paying attention and about how we see but not so much about how things look.

I mean, there's a realism out there that you come across and the realism is about how things look. It's about appearances but in a known way and with conventions about how do you make the pair go behind another pair? How do you make the railroad tracks go into deep space to communicate distance? This is convention. I mean, we see it and it works on us but we don't pay attention to the fact that, "Wow, I'd learn that. I learned that that's yellow but that doesn't tell me that's yellow. I learned that."

This is convoluted but my point is that when you're really looking at things, you're not identifying them, you're looking at them. You can actually see what it is about them that could serve your painting or help you in your painting or lead to a painting. Painting that's about really paying attention and looking is very different than painting that says, "Look at how well I can paint or look at how I know how to make figure appear beautiful or appear proportional." This isn't a judgment call but I do want to draw attention that those are two different things.

In general, I think, the public believes that artists and painters are trying to make convincing images and that there are paintings on the wall to evidence their skill. I would argue that the paintings on the wall, as an opportunity to think about how you experience the world, which is very different than saying, "The painting is there because that person is really good at what they do or got really good by studying." I'm saying the painting is there, whether it's a Frank Stella or even a Sol LeWitt or a Josef Albers, it's there to give you a chance to say, "Wow, do I really know how to pay attention or do I really look at things or do I just identify them?"

Speaker 1: Right. The challenge is to push ourselves and try to go further. What I do when I'm working is I try and I ask myself, "Does this create a state of wonder for somebody?" It's like I can do things that are pretty good and people are going to like them but will it stop somebody and just change their day. That kind of standard and I think that's what you're talking about. It's a much bigger task, it's challenging. It just pushes me, it just pushes me to go further. I'm not entirely

sure when I'm making it like I don't even know totally, do you know what I mean?

Mitchell J: Yeah. One of my teachers from New York said, "When you go to the studio, you should do what you don't know what you're doing or you don't know how to do." It isn't you don't go and make the still life over and over again because you know how, you go and try to do something you don't know. Again, I think that could be pretty confusing as an idea for people who don't go to a studio everyday.

Speaker 1: That idea of like how you finish a painting, we want to have that feeling in it. I mean, we were talking earlier about there's all the academic things that we love we want to have in there but then, it's got to feel almost just slightly out of reach for you. Do you think about it that way when you're working and you need something finished? I mean, it sounds like you work on these paintings, are they all several years?

Mitchell J: I'd say in general, most of them are more than a year. It's hard to really say because sometimes, I work on one for a week or so. I mean, increasingly it feels like I can get closer to some things pretty quickly than before which is totally elusive and I can get to them but then usually, if I can spend time with a painting, I backup a bit. I don't so much second guess as I think or I feel that the painting can go further and can become something else. A lot of the time, I need that initial confidence and clarity to get the painting started. Then, you actually see it through pretty far and yet, "This composition, these colors don't have quite the magic that I really believe they did."

Speaker 1: Initially, right.

Mitchell J: It's a good thing you thought that because otherwise, you'd never get started.

Speaker 1: I mean, for me, it's objectivity. I can't see it after awhile and I work in multiples, six or seven at a time. You lose objectivity but I'm actually learning as I'm going and I can't make the move until I learn. You have to get the painting to a certain point and then, you're going to make that. That's how you learn. You can't make that next step until you've done that.

Mitchell J: That's like the way you tell your kids, "You have to get started on a path and you have to take a part-time job to find out."

Speaker 1: You will find your way as you go.

Mitchell J: What you might not want to do and that helps you find out what you do want to do. You said you work on multiples, I bet a lot of the time, one painting helps you find the solution for something else. I could be working on that and then, I mix this yellowish ochre and I suddenly realize, "If that was over here, that's what would have made all of these come together." A lot of the time, one painting will lead to a solution for another one or not even a solution ...

- Speaker 1: An opportunity.
- Mitchell J: Yeah, it will lead to that really unexpected thing that you wouldn't have done otherwise that makes that painting turn a corner and become mysterious.
- Speaker 1: Yeah. I also think there's something about when you're focused on this one painting and out of the corner of your eye is the thing you were working on earlier. There's a dialog still happening over there.
- Mitchell J: Yeah, your subconscious is still working on the other one. I think sometimes it's fooling you and getting you to go and work on this to mix that color that it knows will enhance that other thing.
- Speaker 1: Yeah, totally. I mean, do you get that where it's like you feel someone's teaching you? It's your intuition really is what we're talking about.
- Mitchell J: Yeah. It does feel like there are two people a lot of the time. The more conscious person working and then, there's somebody else driving that person, maybe, in the background.
- Speaker 1: Right, like that answer is there. You see, silly guy, you're just going to have to do this for a couple of days but if you could just look to your lap, it's sitting there. If you could just trust yourself. I mean that idea of intuition, for me, that's just taking over for me. I'm just trusting that more and more and more. That's just for myself. Are you finding that in your evolution that it's more right than not? I mean, when you're making some of these, you think this just feels right and intuition is driving it more but it fits in with what you're doing and it works more often?
- Mitchell J: I think it can become too intellectual to try to evaluate what's working and what isn't or to even talk too much about strategies. I think the best strategy is to show up five days a week and to go through the two shitty days so you have three good ones. I think usually you get or even if you go through three shitty days to get the two good days. My only strategy is you better have some time to waste or burn or like Agnes Martin sits in that chair for two hours waiting for the inspiration, don't check your phone for two hours.

Everybody, I think, comes to some conclusion about you either listen to Mozart or you don't and you either have two cups of coffee or you have one or you don't have any. I mean, everybody knows what helps you come to the studio and feel and maybe works for this week to help you be engaged and be ready to pay attention. I don't think there's really an answer. It's a pain in the ass, I mean, you have to figure it out week-by-week.

Like my wife is a writer and she listens to this wonderful discussion with Stephen King about, "Here's some things you might consider if you're trying to write a book or trying to write a novel or how to finish your novel." Things about

separating yourself from everybody else and going down into a room and not having the window, gorgeous view out the window of the ocean, you're trying to go into this place yourself.

What she's doing when she's writing is probably very close to what I'm doing when I'm coming here and trying to pay attention. It's definitely interesting to hear what other people go through and how they access these kind of magical moments. I read about other artists and their careers and I look a lot at art's history, I love to watch documentaries about musicians and to hear about their roller coasters that they go up and down on.

They have an album that's out in the world and yet, they're writing the songs for the next album and you're juggling this awareness of people paying attention to your work or talking about it and yet, you're trying to have this private experience. I think hearing what other people have done to get through difficult parts can really help but maybe not all these other painters, maybe it's really good to watch documentaries about writers or about ...

Speaker 1: I love how you describe it. It's just paying attention, you're trying to setup conditions to pay attention. To be more alive and just heighten the sensitivity. This whole thing with the art tends to get better because you get more sensitive the more you do it.

Mitchell J: Not to sound judgmental but I don't see myself painting outside with five or six other people because I'm really having trouble on my own just to be present when I'm there. I even have one of my older teachers told me that he never listens to music when he paints. I listen to a lot of music when I paint.

Speaker 1: Yeah. Back in your childhood, your mother was a musician.

Mitchell J: Yeah, she was a piano teacher.

Speaker 1: Wow, so that was a big part of you. Is this pretty varied, your musical ... ?

Mitchell J: It's all over the place, yeah.

Speaker 1: I would think so.

Mitchell J: Everything from like Chet Baker to rap and ...

Speaker 1: Do you mix it? Do you just do that random play? I do this in workshops. I've got a really [crosstalk 00:36:25].

Mitchell J: I like to listen to College Radio sometimes so I don't really know what's going to come up and they often surprise me with something that can really help. Other times, I really think, "Okay, I definitely am going to listen to Elliott Smith for two hours this morning." I know that that's going to help me because I'm having a crappy day and that's going to help. Again, it really varies a lot and I'm open to a

variety of things that could help.

Speaker 1: Right, taking the energy from the music depending on what you need. It began, it's like, "What do I need here? What other thing, conditions do I need so I can do this thing?"

Mitchell J: I mean, I definitely know that there are aspects of my paintings when they feel complex or when they feel right to me. It's something quite similar to various songs that I would have heard as a teenager or in my 20s. The song, the emotion and the immediacy, the clarity of that feeling I got from certain songs is something I'm trying to tap into. The paintings really feel like a visual equivalent to that emotion that I hear from the music. There's a powerful connection to music for certain.

Speaker 1: When I was looking at something you do and I see this in Morandi's work, this idea of space. What I love about his work is that background is the foreground and the foreground is the background and all these but it's this edge of there's space and then, there's not space. You do that really well but I don't totally understand that or are you aware of what I'm talking about? Why that's so powerful that that background comes up and we see it. It's almost like we're seeing a still life and we're seeing the pieces of the still life.

Mitchell J: Yeah, you're very aware that somebody made this.

Speaker 1: Yes but it's also a still life and there's that play back and forth. It's not like a photograph [crosstalk 00:38:47].

Mitchell J: Yeah, there's an integrity of the two dimensional surface. It's trying to convince you that this is supposed to be something that you see as being realistic or as three dimensional.

Speaker 1: It references it and we say, "This is a place. This has depth, this is a real place." There's this line you'd walk. You do it.

Mitchell J: If I walk it, it would definitely be something that I got from his work. That he should get credit for that because it was something that he made me aware was significant in painting, should you achieve that or should that happen in the painting. Boy, I mean, various teachers showed me Morandi over and over again and I was like, "Why are we looking at this guy?" It meant zero to me, absolutely zero. They kept showing and then, I bumped into it.

It took years and then, all of a sudden, it starts to reveal itself. Every time I see one in life, it still reveals even more. This thing about going back and forth is, again, it's this reminder of how do you put the world together and that you are putting it together. That you are assigning three dimensionality to things if they have them. I mean, like the way that little kids, they do all that research on that.

At what point do they realize that when you put the block out of sight behind

somebody's head, is it still back there? Does that person have a back to their head? You are so two dimensional to me, really. When I find you to be three dimensional, it's all my neurology assigning that but it's fluid the way that it happens that you don't even pay attention or know that you're doing it, that you're assigning all these three dimensionality. Like Alice Neel. That's just crazy, very uncomfortable paintings of people but they're so realistic on some level. When you get away from ideas of convention of what does a portrait look like or ...

Speaker 1: They feel more like the people than the people but it's an abstract painting really.

Mitchell J: Absolutely, right. Alice Neel is connected to that thing of Morandi. If Morandi is doing that, it's only because you got to a point that you could find that in his work. I think plenty of people miss that. I mean, that's testament to how much you pay attention because I think to a lot of people, Morandi just is [crosstalk 00:41:34].

Speaker 1: Right, [crosstalk 00:41:34] it's a still life. Now, I think about it, those are differences. When you put two things that are different next to each other, it has a juice and I think that idea of that it's spatial, but this is a still life, and then it's flat and it's color and it's texture and it's surface and it's been painted and it's flat. Those are opposite ideas that are co-existing. I'm always organizing things in terms of why things look good and why am I attracted to it, why it moves me. You have a lot of this in your work but that idea, that's like a conceptual idea. Those are opposites and that's really interesting. We're hit with the fact that, "I've seen that, I know that. I can smell that room that Morandi's in," and then it's like, "Yeah, but this is canvas and it's paint." All the bottles are lining up at the horizon line and it's like flat and it's folding in front of my eyes.

Mitchell J: It's influx.

Speaker 1: Yes, it's influx.

Mitchell J: That's because, really, all we do is make conclusions about how things look or what they are when we identify them.

Speaker 1: We're trying to lock it up but you can't.

Mitchell J: Right and what he's saying is it's always influx. Josef Albers is saying that too. He's saying, "Everything is influx and whatever your conclusion was about it when you saw it is all a result of the context of that moment." If you look at this painting and you see it one way and you see it in another way the next day. Of course, because everyday is different. It's an exhausting position because it's basically saying that if you really pay attention at that level or if you really consider the world in that way, then it's pretty hard to get to work on time and it's pretty hard to get down the street and do all the things you have to do in your day-to-day life. It's very contrary. Like I remember this painter in New York

who is at an opening one time and she said, "I've been painting so much like everyday for two weeks straight and I feel so stupid. I just can't even talk to anybody." It wasn't that she was painting really with a brush in her hand. It's that she was looking, as she was painting, and paying attention and considering how we make sense of the world to the point that it was unraveling all of these ...

Speaker 1: Her day-to-day ...

Mitchell J: You are so conditioned to know how to drive over here and meet with me and to talk to me and to get, again, to get down the street and do your errands. We're just not aware at the level of which we've tuned ourselves to be able to do things. Again, it's not really about being present or paying attention or looking at things carefully. When you start to look at things carefully, we have limitations.

Speaker 1: Some things are given out.

Mitchell J: Yeah, you're jettisoning some of your abilities.

Speaker 1: I get that.

Mitchell J: I remember being at a party and this cat came and jumped in my lap and I said to the person whose house I was at, I was like, "This is such a sweet cat. Where is the kitten? Where is the other cat?" and they go, "What are you talking about?" I said, "Well, I saw a kitten earlier," and they said, "We don't have any kittens." This big cat is sitting in my lap and earlier, the same cat had walked through the hallway over there like 20 feet away and I hadn't scaled it up. I had actually seen a kitten and all that time, I thought, "They have a kitten." If the big cat had never come and sat in my lap, I would have left and just said, "Yeah, they have a kitten." Imagine like all day, we're doing that but there's never the moment to revisit or to find out that, "Wow, we got it wrong." That was actually an 18-year-old person instead of a 30-year-old person. We didn't really look that carefully and we quickly decided they're 30 but they were actually 18. I mean, we do that all the day.

Speaker 1: We're a little asleep at the wheel, yeah.

Mitchell J: I mean, your brain is always anticipating because that's how we find food and survive. It's always anticipating. It was never really paying attention to what's happening so much as it is anticipating what's about to happen. That's human nature. Always involved in one second, five seconds down the road from where we are. Painting requires you to be right here, right now and not keep thinking, "Well, what's about to happen?"

Speaker 1: Right, or how am I going to get this. Yeah, just being completely present is the strongest likelihood that you're going to make something worthwhile. You start thinking about what you made before, you start thinking about how you want

this thing to turn out, you're done. I just want to touch upon you've got your work in a lot of museums. I mean, this gives you a lot of momentum. That's a hard thing like you get so focused in your art and then to try to find places for it to end up, it's going to be beneficial for your career. How have you been able to manage being completely present in the studio and also the business aspect of this or the importance of having the right gallery or the decision to sell your work directly or where you're going to advertise it or how you're going to advertise it? Do you have that segment? Do you have that other hat and when did that kick in or how do you pull that off?

Mitchell J: Yeah, it's a separate hat. You just said do I have another hat?

Speaker 1: Yeah.

Mitchell J: Those are two different hats.

Speaker 1: Because they're really, really different.

Mitchell J: They're very different. Although paying attention really helps also when you're trying to decide where does the painting go in the world, how do I feel about that, [crosstalk 00:47:47] the right place and things like that. I think that it's enormously complex and everybody has to figure out their own way to negotiate exhibiting and selling and all the things that happened with your painting if it leaves the studio. I think there are plenty of people who, like Jess, who lived in San Francisco.

Speaker 1: Just made art.

Mitchell J: Just gave people money to go to the store and get sandwiches and never set foot out of the house and didn't really meet with people as I understand. Just made paintings in the house and couldn't go outside of the house. That's one solution if you're lucky enough to have somebody who will go outside of the house and do all these things. If you're not, you have to find some other way. My teacher, Leland Bell, said, "Don't be a snob about where you exhibit and don't feel like you have to stay in New York. Maybe you're going to leave New York and you're going to go somewhere and teach a little bit and paint and show your paintings. If your paintings are genuine and they're what you want them to be, then hopefully, they're going to speak about that on their own." Anyway, he freed in some way to say [crosstalk 00:49:08].

Speaker 1: It's still about the work. It's the work.

Mitchell J: Yeah and it would be great to have a show on 57th St. in New York but don't get confused that the show in the library in Palo Alto, on some level, is the same thing. You're just giving people a chance to come across your work. I mean, hopefully they have good light, hopefully the color on the wall isn't pink.

Speaker 1: You're going to make sure that it's not going to take the work down, yeah.

Mitchell J: I mean, some things but I was very lucky because I was showing and I made a lot of effort to send my slides out really early and to go to openings.

Speaker 1: You approached museums yourself?

Mitchell J: Well, I did things to be in touch with people. You don't want to go to a gallery that sells and shows sculpture and say, "Will you show my painting?" Unless maybe they have a big wall and they want to start showing painting too. You want to think of it about where your painting is going to go. You want to go around and see what other people are doing and get ideas about what seems right for you or what seems that you're comfortable with. I do want to make this point that you also have to be fortunate enough that something clicks and something happens to you.

The painter, Sandro Chia, had a big show at Sperone Westwater in New York in the '80s and they didn't know that Mick Jagger was going to come to the opening and David Bowie. It was like serendipitous. All these people happen to come and buy a painting and then suddenly, he wasn't just this painter from Italy occasionally selling a painting, he was like a star or something. That's not going to happen to most of us unless you're just lucky to be in the right place at the right time. I mean, Sandro Chia will tell you, he said this, I heard this, "It kind of like I won the lottery. Everybody's out there painting, you guys are all trying hard, you're being yourself, I was myself."

Speaker 1: Then Mick Jagger buys a painting and it was on the news.

Mitchell J: Right. What if that isn't going to happen to you and you want to show your paintings to the world, you have to look around and find places where you might be able to show them. It just happens I was lucky to have paintings in a restaurant in Palo Alto, at the same time that I was showing on 57th St. in New York. Both things were working but I wasn't a snob and said, "Now, I'm showing in New York, I would never show in this restaurant." This restaurant in Palo Alto, all these people went there from Silicon Valley and Stanford and they started to buy my paintings. When my dealer in New York was having trouble and the gallery was transitioning and then he actually passed away, I had this other thing because I had ...

Speaker 1: You had chosen it and ...

Mitchell J: Yeah, I'd curate it and decided to participate it in and maybe all those people went to New York but they were busy in New York. I even said, "Go to the gallery," and they didn't have time. Lo and behold, they come back to the restaurant and say, "I like that one, can I just buy it?" I was lucky to have paintings in front of a lot of people in Silicon Valley. Then, they start to sell and then I'm thinking, "Well, how can I use some of this resource of the money from people buying my paintings to make sure that they get further out into the world so that maybe this could continue and not just last for one year." I took

risks with some of the money and I put a catalog in The New York Times and did things that nobody's ever done.

Speaker 1: Right. I saw you, I've been watching you do that. If the idea is, which I think it is, is to expose people to the work and have them experience this, I mean that's fabulous.

Mitchell J: It's a catalog. It's a reproduction. It's not the painting but at the same time, it's an invitation. It's like a message in a bottle and you don't know who's going to open it.

Speaker 1: Yeah, but you put prices in there and some things that a lot of galleries won't even put prices on which I love. It's like, "This is the price of the work."

Mitchell J: Well, I just wanted to simplify it.

Speaker 1: Yeah, totally. It was just honest. Did you have galleries that were like, "Whoa, it didn't matter ... "

Mitchell J: With the internet, the whole gallery world has transitioned and unless you were fortunate enough to have somebody who really was going to carry your work and your career down the stream with them, you really have had to find out other ways. I also learned things, like I would see someone have a really major exhibit in New York and find out that they put the catalog together for the show. Because a gallery is swamped with all of these things going on and I was like, "Really?" and I thought, "Well, of course, they put the catalog together so they could really make sure the reproductions were great and make sure the paintings that were in the catalog were the ones they wanted in the catalog."

Speaker 1: Like you have a book, you have that beautiful book you're looking at. You probably created that?

Mitchell J: I worked with a whole bunch of people on these different things that went into the book. It's very much like a group project but the beauty of doing a book wasn't just that I had to really say, "Which paintings tell the story that I want to tell? Which paintings should make the cut?" The book becomes a curating opportunity to really consider what's going on with your work and how you wanted to come across on some level by which paintings you include in the book.

Speaker 1: Right. I mean, the process of making that is totally clarifying.

Mitchell J: I also wanted to really clarify, with the book, how much these other paintings and painters had been important to me that I wouldn't had become who I am if I'm doing something that other people really should get credit. I included all that art history stuff that you saw in the book and in the process of licensing, reproductions by other people, I met all kinds of curators and registrars. I was suddenly talking to all these museums and all these sources so the book became

a wonderful moment of interacting with art world people which is a great compliment to the solitary time in the studio.

I would have a day in the studio painting all day by myself and the next day, I might be on the phone and e-mailing with different people for licensing images or for talking to somebody who might be writing an essay for the book. It was a way of providing some structure for my career and for my studio practice, that otherwise, I'm just here in this warehouse in Silicon Valley in isolation. Like I said, I know that the paintings get into the world because people make effort and so, it was a way for me to try to see them go into the world in a fashion that I felt good about. All these people have collected the work and the book was a way to thank them.

Speaker 1: Because they're in a book. Their paintings are in there maybe, yeah.

Mitchell J: Their paintings in the book. It protects the providence that they're painting. It does a lot of things that, again, I don't want to be like over the intellectual or overly aware of what it does but I go to openings and I've seen people's careers and I know what these different steps mean and what they do. None of that would matter if you didn't have some work that you wanted to make or some aesthetic position that you felt strongly about. Like I see all these young people coming out of the grad school or BFA programs and they're definitely putting the cart before the horse. I mean, you got to figure out who you are and that takes awhile. I sound like the old man saying to the 24-year-old, "Don't do that. How could you know who you are?" I think the main thing is really be in love with writing or painting or music. Being in love with what you're doing and then, you'll find a way because it matters to you.

Speaker 1: Right, you have to care and you have to be passionate and you have to be engaged. It holds you. You keep going even on hard days. If you just keep showing up and it just builds on it and builds on it and builds on it.

Mitchell J: Yeah, but I also want to be really frank that it helps me that a museum just took a small painting that somebody donated to them. That feels awesome. It solves this problem of being overly conscious about, "Does this matter? What I'm doing, does it even matter?" It's not like they've said, "Yes, it matters," but you just say, "Yeah, that one went into that museum and now, it's feeling pretty positive." You don't overly analyze it, you don't get too involved in it.

Speaker 1: Right. You don't totally kick it up but you use it.

Mitchell J: It does. The best thing is it just removes this thing that, otherwise, could be polluting the studio like a preoccupation. In some ways, I sell the paintings and I try to get them out into the world so that I won't wonder too much about, "Well, where are these going to go? Who's going to take care of these?"

Speaker 1: It's a unnecessary peace. I mean, not necessarily necessary but it dovetails really nicely into making art where they are being moved out. The outside world is

coming in and then, you see the work going and then, you've got an empty space. I mean, I love that.

Mitchell J: As you've seen, there are other paintings here and there's some I want to keep. There are some that I have set aside for my son and there's some that I knew that that painting was the most significant painting that I made in 2003. There's no way I'm going to sell it to somebody because it's something that I can always go back and say, "This is the painting now. Does it have any chance of doing something special like that one did?" Those other paintings, it's good to have them around because they help me.

Speaker 1: Yeah, they're the tools to moving forward. It's all about what you can do next and the next thing you're going to make, absolutely.

Mitchell J: It's a very complicated thing. It's a big thing to try to articulate to somebody else.

Speaker 1: Who's not involved in it, yeah.

Mitchell J: Yeah.